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Introduction: the historical problem

Few British political leaders have been so successful and significant as Stanley Baldwin. Yet few have suffered so much belittlement and abuse in retirement, and later biographers and historians have had considerable difficulty in producing plausible explanations for his ascendancy. More nonsense has been written about him than about any other modern prime minister. This has had consequences for wider understandings of twentieth-century Britain, as interpretations of his politics are integral to several major debates: on the Conservative party's long-term electoral dominance, on constitutional issues, on 'national culture', and on Britain's industrial, imperial, and international decline.

This book is not concerned primarily with recounting Baldwin's life. Rather, it concentrates upon defining the nature of his politics, identifying its sources, examining its expressions, and assessing its impact. It aims to contribute to a fuller grasp of larger issues, especially the character and success of modern Conservatism. In doing so, it suggests a method for creating new understandings of British political leaders, by directing attention towards their widest public functions – not just to their particular party and ministerial roles, but to their relationships with the electorate, opposing parties, and the media, and to their interaction with 'political culture'.

I

Baldwin was Conservative leader for fourteen years from 1923 to 1937, and prime minister three times, from 1923 to 1924, 1924 to 1929, and 1935 to 1937. He led his party to larger electoral victories than any other twentieth-century party leader. If his four years, from 1931 to 1935, as deputy to MacDonald within the

'National' government are included, he also led it for a longer period in office than anyone except Thatcher. What makes his career still more significant is that these successes were achieved in new and difficult conditions. Aside from Bonar Law's brief (seven-month) tenure in 1922-3, Baldwin was the first Conservative prime minister to preside over a truly mass democracy, with universal suffrage – female as well as male, and overwhelmingly working class. He was certainly the first to feature on the modern mass media of radio and sound film. He was the first to bear the political impact of prolonged economic depression and mass unemployment in the traditional manufacturing and mining areas, and the first to face a major socialist party and highly politicised trade-union leadership. He became the first leader of opposition to a Labour government, and the only prime minister to confront a general strike. His reputation was made in 1922 by helping to free the Conservative party from a coalition government, yet in 1931 he led it into another and more enduring coalition. During his leadership the British overseas dominions moved from Empire to Commonwealth, and Indian nationalists mounted their greatest civil-disobedience campaigns. The last great struggle between free trade and protection was fought, and sterling suffered its first and most spectacular devaluation. Baldwin was also the first Conservative leader to be confronted by Stalinist and fascist ideologies, and the first who had to justify rearmament to an electorate apprised of the horrors of modern aerial bombardment, steeped in anti-war feeling, and placing its trust in international peace-keeping. He remains the only prime minister to have superintended a royal abdication.

Such were the hazardous conditions for the leader of a party long identified with hierarchy, privilege, monarchy, property, sound finance, imperialism, and the armed services. Not simply Conservative party interests but the very structures and values which sustained those interests seemed under threat, and there were sharp disagreements among Conservatives about how best to react. In these circumstances Baldwin's resilience and success were remarkable. Few political careers have veered so often between such high peaks and such low troughs. He survived several party rebellions, and two attempted coups by senior colleagues. He suffered sustained criticism from conservative mass-circulation newspapers, and the most serious organisational and

electoral challenges ever mounted by newspaper owners. He defeated or out-manoeuved many of the leading public figures of his time – Lloyd George, Asquith, MacDonald, Birkenhead, Austen and Neville Chamberlain, Beaverbrook, Bishop Temple, King Edward VIII, and Churchill. He lost two general elections, in 1923 and 1929, but on both occasions Conservatives retained the largest share of the popular vote and denied their opponents an overall parliamentary majority. Those defeats were amply recouped in the landslide victories of 1924, 1931, and 1935, when Conservatives secured majorities of over 200 seats, and in the last two elections the largest popular support of modern times. Baldwin also enjoyed more personal parliamentary triumphs than any other twentieth-century party leader. In the mid 1920s and again in the mid 1930s he commanded an extraordinary national ascendancy, surpassed only by Churchill from 1940 to 1945. To criticise him at Conservative meetings during the 1930s was said to be ‘little short of blasphemy’. If an MP interrupted him while speaking in the House of Commons ‘it seemed almost like brawling in church’.¹ During the 1937 Coronation he shared the popular applause with the new King and Queen. Unusually for a party leader he retired at a time of his own choosing, amidst warm tributes not just from his own party but from his opponents – in Churchill’s words, ‘loaded with honours and enshrined in public esteem’.²

II

The problems in interpreting Baldwin’s career have generated a succession of unusually unpleasant, divided, and amorphous historical reputations. His contemporaries had been perplexed by him. His rise to high office was rapid and unexpected, a surprise magnified by his own insistence that he was just an ordinary, simple, man. A jocular public statement a week before he became prime minister – that he looked forward to retiring to his native Worcestershire ‘to read the books I want, to live a decent life, and to keep pigs’³ – came to define an image, but also a problem. He

¹ C. Petrie, *Chapters of My Life* (1950), pp. 165, 171; T. Jones, ‘Stanley Baldwin’, *DNB* p. 50.

² J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin* (1978), p. 351; Attlee and Sinclair in *HC Deb* 324, cc. 682–4 (31 May 1937); Cripps to Baldwin, 31 May 1937, SB 152/170; W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. I: *The Gathering Storm* (1948), p. 18.

³ Belatedly reported in *The Times*, 25 May 1929.

had been an industrialist, yet seemed to be a countryman. He was a politician who could appear to be non-political. He had literary and cultural interests yet paraded a dislike of intellectuals; he disdained oratory yet made impressive speeches. Dramatic decisions and sharp reversals of fortune during his first two years as leader deepened the mystery. He could seem both sedate and impulsive, appear ineffective yet transform the political landscape. He made serious mistakes, only to rebound with great successes. He often looked vulnerable but proved to be irremovable, a political innocent yet able to beat the most formidable opponents. Contemporary commentators described him as an 'enigma', and searched for the 'real' Baldwin. Profile-writers and memoirists predicted that he would 'puzzle the future historian'.¹

Within four years of his ministerial retirement many thought there was no puzzle at all, as he became a principal victim in an enduring denigration of the dominant elements of interwar public life. No other former prime minister's reputation has collapsed so completely and so swiftly, nor turned upon so few sentences.² Munich, the outbreak of war, and Dunkirk created an atmosphere in which earlier criticisms by Conservative 'anti-appeasers' of Baldwin's reactions to German rearmament became widely accepted across the political spectrum, and were expanded into a comprehensive indictment. A misjudged passage in a November 1936 speech was seized upon as proof that, following a severe by-election defeat at East Fulham in 1933, he had minimised the German danger and delayed British rearmament until the 1935 election had been won – resulting in ineffective deterrence, diplomatic humiliation, and military reverses. Most vividly in *Guilty Men* by 'Cato' (Michael Foot, Peter Howard, and Frank Owen) and most savagely in an article by A. L. Rowse and in the popular press, it was asserted that Baldwin had deceived and betrayed the nation because his preference, sustained by ruthless party management, had always been for doing nothing except retaining power. He seemed ordinary and simple precisely because he was ordinary and simple; for 'Cato' a 'little man', for George Orwell

¹ E.g. A. G. Gardiner, *Certain People of Importance* (1926), pp. 1–8; W. Steed, *The Real Stanley Baldwin* (1930); B. Roberts, *Stanley Baldwin. Man or Miracle?* (1936); L. S. Amery, *My Political Life*, 3 vols. (1953–5), II, 595.

² For fuller examination, see P. Williamson, 'Baldwin's Reputation', forthcoming.

‘simply a hole in the air’.⁶ A legitimate attempt to preserve his own property – the ornamental gates to his home, requisitioned for scrap metal – brought violent public abuse and hate mail.⁷

Much of the criticism came from writers on the left who preferred to forget Labour and Liberal opposition to government rearmament during the mid 1930s; it became a standard anti-Conservative weapon for radical publicists preparing for the post-war general election.⁸ Yet criticism was also fostered by a Conservative newspaper proprietor and minister – Beaverbrook (employer of the *Guilty Men* authors) – seeking revenge in a quarrel that long pre-dated rearmament, and it went largely unchallenged by other Conservatives now cloaking themselves in the Churchillian mantle. By 1945 Baldwin had been erased from the party’s public memory, his name avoided in election literature and speeches.⁹ Passages from his addresses, quoted or anthologised in innumerable interwar celebrations of English politics and culture, vanished from the equally numerous celebrations published in the 1940s. After his death in 1947 his principal memorial was a simple monument by the roadside near his Worcestershire home – a poignant contrast to his national acclaim in 1937 (plate 15). The critical verdict now received the imprimatur of Churchill’s war memoirs, the index of which encapsulated the indictment: ‘great party manager’, ‘aversion to foreign problems’, ‘excludes Churchill from office’ and, famously, ‘confesses putting party before country’.¹⁰ To this was added a Keynesian historiography which, forgetting that Baldwin was not a social democrat and discounting imperial protectionism as an alternative – even credible – political economy, extended the charges of neglect and failure to the issues of economic depression and mass unemployment. A broad consensus, Labour–Churchillian–Keynesian,

⁶ A. Salter, *Security* (1939), pp. 194–7; ‘Cato’, *Guilty Men* (July 1940), pp. 17–21, 25–7, 35–7; A. L. Rowse, ‘Reflections on Lord Baldwin’, *Political Quarterly* 12 (1941), 305–17, reprinted in Rowse, *The End of an Epoch* (1947), pp. 77–89; press extracts in M&B pp. 1056–7; G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941; Penguin edn. 1984), p. 56.

For the story of the Astley Hall gates and examples of the abuse, see M&B pp. 1056–63.

⁷ E.g. ‘Gracchus’, *Your M.P.* (1944), p. 18; T. L. Horabin, *Politics Made Plain* (Penguin special, 1944), pp. 49–50.

⁸ J. Ramsden, *The Age of Churchill and Eden* (1995), p. 80, and see pp. 171–2. An exception was Q. Hogg, *The Left Was Never Right* (1945), pp. 54, 57–65.

¹⁰ Churchill, *Gathering Storm*, p. 697, and see pp. 30, 80, 161, 181, 194–5, 198, 199. Churchill nevertheless contributed to the Baldwin memorial, and spoke at its unveiling in 1950: M&B p. 1072.

became entrenched. It entered the textbooks, and it remains a common impression, perpetuated even by some of the better historians.¹¹ Forty years after the war Michael Foot, by then Labour party leader but still brandishing *Guilty Men*, was able to block a proposal to place a statue of Baldwin alongside those of other prime ministers in the Houses of Parliament.¹²

So compelling were the perspectives of the 1940s that they were accepted by Baldwin's official biographer, G. M. Young, and – almost as damagingly – did not seem to be contested by his friend and chief obituarist, Tom Jones,¹³ nor by his surviving Cabinet colleagues.¹⁴ In mitigation Young argued that, during the General Strike and the Abdication especially, Baldwin had preserved the constitution and national unity. But his 'explanations' of the main points of censure only added further criticisms: indolence, irresolution, inattention to foreign affairs, even negligence of official duties, underlain by an inordinate personal need to retain public affection.¹⁵ Baldwin, a reluctant biographical subject but stung by critics who in his view lacked 'historical sense', had been persuaded by friends to commission Young because he thought a historian who had written *Portrait of an Age* (1936) and seemed to share his own distaste for 'the modern psychological approach in biographies' would be well equipped to 'picture the mentality' of

¹¹ E.g. B. Pimlott, 'Many More Pygmies than Giants', *The Independent on Sunday*, 4 April 1993: 'Baldwin neglected to rearm against Hitler'.

¹² J. Critchley, 'Why Baldwin Deserves a Place in the House', J. Haviland, 'Baldwin Must Wait for his Commons Statue', and 4th Earl Baldwin letter, *The Times*, 27 Feb., 5, 10 March 1982. *Guilty Men* was re-published in 1998 as a Penguin 'Twentieth Century Classic' (sic), with a new preface by Foot. The introduction, by John Stevenson, gives only the slightest indication of how little the book has withstood subsequent scholarly scrutiny.

¹³ Jones drafted his obituary in 1937, but when revising it in 1941 felt unable to 'appraise' the rearmament controversy (Jones papers A7). What stuck – and was adopted by Young – was the suggestion of 'indolence'. Only a shortened version was published in *The Times*, 15 Dec. 1947, but the full text appeared as a pamphlet, *Lord Baldwin. A Memoir* (1947). Jones's review of Young's book, in *The Observer*, 16 Nov. 1952, left its central charges intact, and Young's interpretation influenced Jones's article on Baldwin in the *DNB*, written 1953–4. Yet as 'P.Q.R.' in *The Spectator*, 7 June 1935, Jones had praised Baldwin for making possible the 'drastic' air rearmament 'now in operation'.

¹⁴ E.g. reviews of GMY by L. S. Amery, *The Spectator*, 14 Nov. 1952; Lord Norwich (Duff Cooper), *The Daily Mail*, 14 Nov. 1952; W. Elliot, *Time and Tide*, 15 Nov. 1952. Amery's criticisms in *My Political Life* became particularly influential.

¹⁵ GMY, esp. pp. 23, 56–8, 61–3, 72, 100, 106, 120–2, 126, 128, 167, 182, 200, 204. In June 1935 Young had shown himself markedly less worried about Germany than Baldwin had already been for two years: see AWB pp. 349–50.

the interwar years.¹⁶ Young, however, approached his task in exactly the manner Baldwin had feared, one which encouraged the substitution of speculation and innuendo for what Young considered to be the inadequacies of his private papers as source material. Finding 'the psychology of the subject . . . so absorbing that the history . . . mov[ed] further and further into the background',¹⁷ Young initiated another persistent strand of interpretation – where psychological or temperamental supposition replaces adequate historical explanation.

However, a reaction to this historiography had already begun, with Bassett's demonstration that Baldwin's alleged 'confession' on the difficulties of rearmament had been misrepresented. Baldwin's November 1936 statement had in fact referred to conditions well before the 1935 election, and at that election he had sought a mandate to expand a rearmament which was already under way.¹⁸ The reaction was pursued most vigorously by Baldwin's second son who – after a private rebuke to an embarrassed Jones¹⁹ – published a biographical counterblast. Against Young's psychological speculations he presented Baldwin's formative experiences, religion, and values – although his candour about his father's parents and a schoolboy scrape unintentionally stimulated the appetite for yet more psychological interpretations. Against the Churchillian–Labour account of the 1930s he deployed the best available historical source – at that time *Parliamentary Debates* – which those claiming historical authority had signally ignored.²⁰ In these ways he anticipated conclusions from later academic research, and enabled Robert Blake to produce the first detached (if plainly Conservative) assessment.²¹

¹⁶ Jones *DL*, pp. 482, 527 (21–22 Jan. 1941, 23 Dec. 1944); M&B pp. 1059, 1063; Baldwin in H. Pearson and H. Kingsmill, *Talking of Dick Whittington* (1947), p. 189.

¹⁷ GMY p. 11; Young to Duff Cooper, 22 Sept. 1946, Cooper papers 2.1.

¹⁸ R. Bassett, 'Telling the Truth to the People. The Myth of the Baldwin "Confession"', *The Cambridge Journal* 2 (1948–9), 84–95, also 239–42.

¹⁹ A. W. Baldwin–Jones letters, 29, 31 March 1953, CUL Add. 7938; Jones wrote that 'in a long life I can't recall receiving a letter which has so shaken me'.

²⁰ A. W. Baldwin, *My Father: The True Story* (1955). Another notable riposte was D. C. Somervell, *Stanley Baldwin. An Examination of Some Features of Mr. Young's Biography* (1953), and there was a lesser-known pamphlet defence, D. H. Barber, *Stanley Baldwin* (1959).

²¹ R. Blake, 'Baldwin and the Right', in J. Raymond (ed.), *The Baldwin Age* (1960). Blake had earlier accepted Young's and Churchill's interpretations in reviews for Beaverbrook's *Evening Standard*, 'The Disastrous Mr. Baldwin' (14 Nov. 1952) and 'Was Winston Fair to Baldwin?' (25 Sept. 1953).

With the opening of government, party, and personal records from the late 1960s, understandings of the interwar period became more properly historical. The new evidence brought specialist party and policy studies which stimulated fresh and more complicated interpretations, and in 1969 the first comprehensive, fully documented, biography by Keith Middlemas and John Barnes. It became possible to transcend naive criticism or defence in favour of understanding, and led in time to such a rehabilitation of Baldwin's reputation that in the 1990s a Conservative prime minister could publicly claim him as a model, and a Labour prime minister could speak at the dedication of a memorial to him in Westminster Abbey.²²

Some recent historical studies have been perceptive about Baldwin.²³ Nevertheless, the general effect of interpretations since the 1960s has been to re-cast him as an elusive figure. His public position notwithstanding, the official and private records display no firm and persistent imprint of him as a commanding figure. Contemporaries at a loss to explain his dominance frequently ascribed it to 'character', and subsequent accounts – from Jones and G. M. Young onwards – have not always been more substantial or precise. Middlemas and Barnes's 'new style' of leadership turns out to be little more than basic man-management.²⁴ Various versions of an interpretation that Baldwin himself chose to project – 'my worst enemy would not say of me that I did not know what the reaction of the English people would be to a particular course of action'²⁵ – are less explanations than evasions. To say that he

²² John Major on becoming prime minister in 1990 and Tony Blair in his address on 18 December 1997 – marking the fiftieth anniversary of Baldwin's death – both invoked him as a 'consensual' politician, plainly drawing parallels with their own public stances. Earlier, in 1967, Sir Edward Heath had spoken at a private House of Commons luncheon to commemorate the centenary of Baldwin's birth. The organising committee included Lord (R. A.) Butler, Sir Geoffrey Lloyd, Lord and Lady Davidson, and Baldwin's surviving private secretaries.

²³ Notably M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920-1924* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 297-300, 407-8, 421-2, and *The Impact of Hitler. British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 259-71; B. Schwarz, 'The Language of Constitutionalism: Baldwinite Conservatism', in *Formations of Nation and People* (1984), 1-18; D. Jarvis, 'Stanley Baldwin and the Ideology of the Conservative Response to Socialism, 1918-1931' (PhD thesis, University of Lancaster, 1991; hereafter cited as 'Jarvis thesis'), to be published as *Conservative Ideology and the Response to Socialism 1918-1931*.

²⁴ M&B ch. 18, esp. pp. 488-91; K. Middlemas, 'Stanley Baldwin', in H. van Thal (ed.), *The Prime Ministers*, 2 vols. (1975), II, 255-6.

²⁵ E.g. Abdication speech, in *SOL* p. 73 (10 Dec. 1936); *GMV* pp. 54, 129.

embodied 'Englishness' overlooks the extent to which Englishness has always been diverse and contested: what did Durham miners, Worcestershire farmers, and City financiers share? It also overlooks a rare period of Conservative success in Scotland.²⁶ Attributing his power to some special ability to interpret and reflect public opinion²⁷ assumes that 'public opinion' formed something homogeneous, easily identifiable, and intrinsically Conservative, rather than divided, diffuse, and in substantial degrees reactionary, Liberal, Labour, or socialist. Over 45 per cent of electors were always non- or anti-Conservative. It also assumes that 'public opinion' existed as an independent entity, rather than developing in dynamic relationship with what was said by the competing political parties, let alone the media. Ascribing Baldwin's success simply to the occupation of the 'centre' or 'middle' of politics presumes that a political 'centre' pre-existed in some manifest and stable form, rather than having repeatedly to be defined and constructed. To describe him unambiguously as 'consensual', moderate, or conciliatory is to disregard periods when he deliberately sharpened differences, notably over the General Strike and at the 1924 and 1931 elections.²⁸ A still grander or (depending on perspective) more dismissive view, that he encapsulated the spirit or will of the interwar age²⁹ begs similar if larger questions. All these interpretations imply that Baldwin's conception and practice of leadership was essentially passive, neutral, or hollow – 'not to create popular feeling', but to 'react to the mood of the people'³⁰ – in effect, non-leadership. Then again, it is certainly significant that he was considered sincere and trustworthy, and had skills of communication on the platform and in the new mass media.³¹ But these

²⁶ Blake, 'Baldwin and the Right', p. 26; Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, pp. 212–13. For the indicative significance of the Scottish vote, see R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class* (Oxford, 1990), p. 264.

²⁷ Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, pp. 207–8; S. Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party. The Crisis of 1929–1931* (New Haven, 1988), p. 8.

²⁸ A point well made in C. L. Mowat, 'Baldwin Restored?', *Journal of Modern History* 27 (1955), 171–2. See also B. Malament, 'Baldwin Re-restored?', *ibid.* 44 (1972), 95, and Jarvis thesis, pp. 12–14 and ch. 6.

²⁹ E.g. Blake, 'Baldwin and the Right', pp. 25–6; epigraph to M&B, p. viii; D. Cannadine, 'Politics, Propaganda and Art. The Case of Two Worcestershire Lads', *Midland History* 4 (1977), 107; Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, p. 207; S. Ball, '1916–1929', in A. Seldon (ed.), *How Tory Governments Fall* (1996), p. 260.

³⁰ Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, p. 8.

³¹ J. Ramsden, 'Baldwin and Film', in N. Pronay and D. W. Spring (eds.), *Propaganda, Politics and Film 1918–45* (1982), pp. 126–8; J. Ramsden, *An Appetite for Power. A History of the*

describe forms of delivery, empty in themselves, rather than the qualities for creating a believing audience: substance and purpose.

There are other lines of inquiry – structural, organisational, sociological, ideological – which suggest that Baldwin himself mattered very little, and that his long period of prominence owed as much to fortunate circumstances as had his original rise to the premiership. The 1918 redistribution of parliamentary seats, the 1921 partition of Ireland, and the efficiency of the Conservative party machine; the Conservative preference of newly enfranchised women voters, the broader social composition of direct tax-payers, the steady rise in real incomes; the division of the anti-Conservative vote, Liberal party disintegration, the troubles of the first two Labour governments: together these certainly explain a great deal about interwar Conservative success. So, more recently, do important analyses of interwar Conservative propaganda, seen as promoting anti-collectivist and anti-inflationary ‘conventional wisdoms’ and hostile stereotypes of the trade-unionised working class.³² Plainly enough, Baldwin’s power and success were no more his own unaided creation than were those of any other political leader. Yet these approaches do not register the large and distinctive impression he made upon the public mind. Nor do they accommodate the widespread contemporary belief that he constituted a political force and an electoral asset in himself.

The nature of writing about Baldwin is so peculiar that it can produce verdicts which are, in the strict sense of the word, incredible. Although now properly discounted as a specific explanation for Baldwin’s calling of the 1923 election, it is still asserted as general interpretation that his chief political aim, an ‘obsession’ which ‘sustained his career’, was to exclude Lloyd George from office³³ – this when he was confronted by the rather more fundamental challenges of newly emergent socialism, direct-action

Conservative Party since 1830 (1998), pp. 253–6; Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, pp. 11, 16.

³² The seminal essay is R. McKibbin, ‘Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the “Public” in Interwar Britain’, in his *Ideologies of Class*, pp. 259–93. See also D. Jarvis, ‘British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s’, *English Historical Review* 111 (1996), 59–84.

³³ R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (1970 edn), pp. 220, 222, 227, 236; J. Campbell, ‘Stanley Baldwin’, in J. P. Mackintosh (ed.), *British Prime Ministers of the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols. (1977), I, 191 and *passim*; M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867–1939* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 229, 274; Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, p. 8. This interpretation originated with Jones and Amery.

trade unionism, and aggressive totalitarian regimes. Again, we are told that Baldwin's party was engaged in a 'retreat from Empire' back to 'English nationalism', and that he himself had little interest in the Empire or even the rest of Britain;³⁴ yet Conservatives still defined themselves as imperialist and unionist, and Baldwin came to be regarded as the leading imperial statesman of his time. A recent claim that his contribution should be understood chiefly in terms of economic and social policies³⁵ is interesting in contradicting earlier interpretations, but it would have surprised Baldwin almost as much as the Cabinet colleagues actually responsible for those policies – Neville Chamberlain and Churchill. Equally curious conclusions result when a couple of passages from his speeches about old-fashioned industrial paternalism and the English countryside – the last now as often quoted and anthologised as it had been in the interwar years – are taken to encapsulate his essential themes. Martin Wiener, in a book influential among politicians and publicists in the 1980s, made him symbolic of a supposed English culture of backward-looking 'anti-industrialism';³⁶ yet his party was supported by most industrialists, he himself had spent twenty years helping to create a modern industrial firm, and he continued to own large holdings of industrial shares. Others have similarly presented Baldwin's vision as 'unrealistic, irrelevant and escapist'. It is claimed that he had 'no ideas', and 'never . . . could be bothered to go to the heart of his country's problems';³⁷ yet this was a leader who not only survived intense public scrutiny for fourteen years, but commanded widespread respect. Such has been the poverty of the interpretative tradition that it could produce Robert Skidelsky's glib paradox: 'the most interesting thing about Stanley Baldwin is that he was completely uninteresting'.³⁸

³⁴ M. Pugh, *The Tories and the People 1880-1935* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 184, 185, also Pugh, *Making of Modern British Politics*, pp. 277-8, 296; Campbell, 'Baldwin', p. 210; Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, pp. 211-13.

³⁵ A. Seldon, 'Conservative Century', in A. Seldon and S. Ball (eds.), *Conservative Century* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 32-4.

³⁶ M. J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 100-2, and index p. 211.

³⁷ D. Cannadine, 'Politics, Propaganda and Art', pp. 104-7; Campbell, 'Baldwin', pp. 210, 216.

³⁸ R. Skidelsky, *Interests and Obsession. Selected Essays* (1993), p. 152, from his review of R. Jenkins, *Baldwin* (1987).

III

The present study proceeds from the view that so dominant a politician cannot be uninteresting; that on the contrary study of Baldwin raises central historical questions which if intelligently addressed can reveal much about Conservatism and the broader political culture of the interwar years. It contains an account of Baldwin's mature career, and an examination of his early life. It is not, however, a biography, in the conventional sense of being structured as the chronicle of a life. This is not simply because Baldwin already has numerous biographers, but rather because of scepticism about the value of biography – certainly as applied in the relentless flow of biographies on twentieth-century British politicians. Indeed, the unusual character of Baldwin's leadership makes him an especially difficult subject for traditional biography, in ways which expose the shortcomings of the genre.

Biographical information is manifestly important for understanding political leadership, and full-scale biographies may be valuable in opening the study of recent periods and subjects where documented research has not previously been undertaken. But once more broadly researched historical studies have proceeded, biography rarely brings further illumination. Narration of a life is easy on the mind of author and reader, but it is not obviously a powerful or even an effective form of explanation. Too often it is a substitute for such explanation. All accounts of the past are abstractions of some kind, but the tendency of political biography is to abstract in particularly misleading ways. For all political leaders are enveloped and entangled within a mass of pressures and expectations – from colleagues, civil servants, their own party activists, and their opponents; from Parliament, the media, sectional groups, voters; from different and sometimes conflicting policies, and from the unpredictable and often irresistible force of events. In reacting to such pressures, they cannot escape being substantially diverted and shaped by them. Their careers lose the linear and self-propelled trajectory assumed by biography. It is a commonplace that Baldwin's political eminence could never have been predicted from his life before October 1922; but it is equally true that if he could have substantially controlled his own career it would on several occasions have taken quite different courses from those it actually took between May 1923 and May 1937.

Then again, the imperative task of political persuasion and the weight of party and electoral expectations mean that political leaders partly create for themselves, and partly have imposed upon them, a *public* personality. This constructed or imagined persona has unusual properties. It may have only tenuous links with the politician's private personality; yet it becomes a force in itself, which the individual feels he must respect or try to exploit, and which in some sense he becomes. Quite literally, the lives of leading politicians are not their own. It is not, therefore, self-evident that examination of psychological development – aside from the obvious evidential problems it raises – reveals much of genuine significance for a public career. Moreover, as few politicians are able to impose themselves sufficiently and for long enough to affect the course and character of a political system, so only a few deserve more biographical attention than can be supplied by a good *Dictionary of National Biography* entry. The limitations of the genre are indicated by the way that all extended political biographies – notably the thousand pages of Middlemas and Barnes on Baldwin – are drawn inexorably into descriptions of the 'times', in attempts to supply meaning for their accounts of the 'life'.

In principle, the most complete understanding of major politicians would seem to require two complementary approaches. One is the study of 'high politics' – in the interpretative, not simply descriptive, sense, where the narrative is not of one politician nor even of one party, but rather of the whole system of political leadership. Here individuals are placed within the full multi-party and multi-policy contexts which properly explain the details of their careers. Such high-political accounts now exist for almost the whole period of Baldwin's leadership.³⁹ Their insights – the remorseless situational and tactical pressures, the chronic uncertainties, and the short horizons which afflict all political leadership – are taken for granted here.

The second approach, followed in this book, is that appropriate for the small number of politicians who, by their originality as well as importance, merit extended individual attention. It seeks to go beyond biographical narrative, in order to ask questions about the

³⁹ Cowling, *Impact of Labour 1920-1924*, P. Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire 1926-1932* (Cambridge, 1992); Cowling, *Impact of Hitler 1933-1940*. The best statement of 'the character of high politics' is in the first, pp. 2-12.

nature and practice of political leadership. The qualities that really distinguish and explain a politician's effectiveness are manifested less in the linear succession of particular events than in longer-term consistencies or patterns which, as the narrative suspensions in the best biographies indicate, are revealed more effectively by an analytical, rather than narrative, structure. More particularly, these qualities are likely to be revealed in speeches – in public presentation and argument.

Attention to speeches is part of the originality claimed here. Speech – political rhetoric – has rarely been the main source material for recent historical work.⁴⁰ This is partly because insufficient thought is given to matching sources and questions: questions are addressed to inappropriate sources, or else particular sources are approached with questions to which they cannot supply answers. It is also because the 'reality' of political leadership is presumed to reside overwhelmingly among the private or organisational evidence of letters, diaries, memoranda, and minutes, so that – except for the occasional major pronouncement – speeches or other public statements are treated as supplementary or inferior sources. Where the questions are to do with policy formation, decision-making, party tactics, private opinion, and detailed motivation, this is obviously correct. Here public statements will not yield answers. Historians do not assume that a politician's speech – or article or book – states the complete or even partial grounds for a particular action, nor that it reveals his full, or even any, belief about a specific issue. For these aspects of politics, the problematic nature of speeches and publications as public and rhetorical statements – necessarily concerned more with persuasion and concealment than with description and explanation – is well understood.

Yet amidst the rich private evidence it can be forgotten that politicians are not just policy-makers, tacticians, and administrators. They are also public figures for whom speech-making and publication is a principal function, precisely because politics is a *public* activity and because they need to win support for them-

⁴⁰ For suggestive comments on the significance and possibilities of such material, see M. Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine and Thought', in M. Bentley and J. Stevenson (eds.), *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 123–53, and H. C. G. Matthew, 'Rhetoric and Politics in Great Britain, 1860–1950', in P. J. Waller (ed.), *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 34–58.

selves, their parties, and their causes. It can as easily be forgotten that while historians can observe the inner workings of party and government, these were hidden from all except a tiny number of contemporaries. Everyone else could only 'know' and respond to political leaders through their constructed and projected public characters, especially as revealed by speeches and media presentation. For this reason, those politicians who work only at their correspondence and only in committees will not usually go far. What distinguishes political leaders from backbenchers or officials are the party, public, or parliamentary reputations acquired by public utterance. This is what creates their ability to become policy-makers and strategists; and their power to affect party and national affairs continues to be largely dependent upon this capacity for public persuasion.

So, in an important sense, politicians are what they speak and publish. What they say may often be the collective party line, but leaders are normally such because they add something distinctive and persuasive, causing particular importance to be attached to themselves not just by their own party and supporters but by opposing parties and other bodies too. These things most obviously consist of observations on issues and policies, and challenges or replies to opponents and rivals. But speeches also have a deeper function. They place the issues and tactics of the moment within the wider interests and values, the fears and antipathies, the histories and the purposes that constitute both a party's claims for support and an individual's claim to significance – which have variously been called ideology, doctrine or, more recently, 'language'.⁴¹ These may be intellectually rigorous and original, though normally they are not. Their function is not to satisfy academic tests as theory, but to attract and hold the support of diverse audiences possessing a range of conventional beliefs and present interests, as well as hopes for the future. Nevertheless, in these utterances political leaders may well be imaginative and creative. They seek to form particular understandings of current conditions, and to

⁴¹ Some social and electoral historians, disillusioned by structural and especially class analyses, have recently taken the so-called 'linguistic turn', offering examination of political 'language' – and hence the creative role of politicians and the state in political culture – as a major advance in understanding. Yet such emphases had been central to the earlier 'high politics' studies, so often disparaged by such historians. See esp. Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, pp. 5–10, and Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine and Thought'.

define issues in certain ways. They aim to persuade their audiences to want, expect, or fear new things – or old things for new reasons, or new things for old reasons. They encourage them to adopt new beliefs and detect new friends or enemies – or else to hold fast to familiar values, allies, and enmities. By these means they not only shape opinions on particular issues, but create more lasting political identities and electoral alliances. It is by these means that a political ‘centre’ or ‘consensus’ may come into existence – not simply from the momentum of events or structural change, but by the constructive and collective efforts of successful politicians, forming areas of agreement and selecting points of difference.

Given that speeches have these persuasive and instrumental functions, they may or may not express aspects of the speaker’s private belief. In judging how far private belief may be a likely and significant component, personal correspondence and diaries can provide assistance. But private records concerned with the stream of events do not in themselves necessarily or even usually contain extended evidence about belief, because by their very nature as private statements any belief is chiefly left implicit, a matter of silent assumption. Belief is more likely to be indicated in underlying and consistent themes, in the wider framework and texture of responses to particular events, as revealed where the politician is compelled to make concessions towards explicitness – in long series of speeches and publications.

British party ideologies or doctrines have almost invariably been investigated through examination of ‘thinkers’ and ‘writers’ who produced quasi-academic theoretical tracts. As Conservatives have generated few major ‘thinkers’ and as Conservative politicians rarely acknowledge the influence even of lesser ‘thinkers’, there has been widespread acceptance of their routine insistence that – with, perhaps, the exceptional case of ‘Thatcherism’ – Conservatism has no ideology or theory, but is unique (and they would claim superior) in being ‘empirical’, ‘instinctive’, ‘practical’, or ‘realistic’. This has been compounded by many political historians having a depleted conception of what is ‘political’, which is reduced to programmes, policies, and organisation. It has been further aggravated by limited assumptions about the elements in ‘electoral behaviour’, narrowed to the structural determinants of ‘class’ or, most recently, gender. The broader character of political

activity and electoral choice, the context of argument and imagery derived from a rich and varied political culture, remains under-explored.⁴² Insofar as the existence of Conservative ideas has been acknowledged, these have usually been presented as large abstractions, unrelated to specific political cultures and arguments, and so appearing to be bland, banal, and toothless. Accordingly histories of the Conservative party rarely consider 'ideas' or 'thought' a worthwhile subject for study. Yet the notion that Conservatism was just an empty container filled and re-filled by the expediencies of the moment is inherently implausible. It has been well said that the party's claim to be non-ideological is itself an ideological statement.⁴³ But what must also be understood is that party doctrine or ideology has always been generated much less by 'thinkers' than by politicians themselves; that within the Conservative party its collective leaders and Central Office staff were those who most publicly and persistently sought to persuade large audiences that Conservative ideas and values were superior to those of their various opponents.

This book therefore makes considerable use of Baldwin's speeches – both the large number which are obviously political statements, and his many ostensibly 'non-political' addresses. The precise extent to which he expressed a distinctive political message is hard to assess, because no other leading interwar politician has been examined in this manner. A historical literature which would allow adequate comparison does not yet exist. Nevertheless it has always been plain that Baldwin possessed a public character quite unlike – and much more widely admired than – that of any other contemporary politician. The argument here is that its essential elements lay in two features: the unusual emphasis his speeches and addresses gave to deeper, doctrinal, concerns, and the particular substance and tone of this doctrine. Together these gave Baldwin an ability to appear free from party interests and

⁴² See, however, F. O'Gorman, *British Conservatism. Conservative Thought from Burke to Thatcher* (1986) – an anthology which includes passages by Baldwin, with sensible commentary, pp. 42–7, 81–3, 179–84 – and the recent work in M. Francis and I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds.), *The Conservatives and British Society 1880–1990* (Cardiff, 1996), and J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society. Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997).

⁴³ E. H. H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism. The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party 1880–1914* (1995), p. 312.

high-political pressures – a position with great potential strengths, but also liable to cause difficulties.

Baldwin's speeches have not been wholly ignored by biographers and historians. As four volumes of his addresses were published and as several of his phrases and passages remain well known, it has long been recognised that they indicate something important. Yet even apart from the general undervaluation of speeches as historical evidence, Baldwin has suffered from remarkably naive, selective, and uncontextualised readings of his words.⁴⁴ His November 1936 reference to rearmament is just the most obvious instance. Other persistent sources of misunderstanding are those of May 1924 on the English countryside, and March 1925 on the Baldwin ironworks. Even catch phrases – such as 'dynamic force' or 'Safety First' – have been misconstrued or misattributed. Another, lesser, example is indicative of the obstacles facing serious discussion of Baldwin. It has long been a social-historical 'fact', derived from his own words, that as an old Harrovian he determined to pack his first Cabinet with former Harrow pupils. Yet what should have been evident from such an improbable statement is confirmed by any intelligent reading of the reprinted address containing the statement, and proven by the original newspaper report punctuated throughout with the words 'laughter' and 'cheers' – that the comment was, quite simply, a joke.⁴⁵

IV

The principal aim of this book is to examine a Conservative political mind, and a particular form of party leadership. It is an investigation of political power considered not simply in terms of decisions in Cabinet or party councils, but as relationships established with various public audiences, including the opposing parties. The approach is therefore deliberately selective. Tactical activities now familiar from the 'high politics' accounts are noted where appropriate, but the emphasis is upon a political rhetoric and the presentation of a public personality. As these constituted

⁴⁴ Exceptions are Schwarz, 'The Language of Constitutionalism', and Jarvis thesis, ch. 6; also P. Williamson, 'The Doctrinal Politics of Stanley Baldwin', in M. Bentley (ed.), *Public and Private Doctrine* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 181–208.

⁴⁵ *OE* p. 267; *The Times*, 20 July 1923. Omission of audience reactions in Baldwin's collected addresses has contributed to other misreadings.

a major attempt to elevate Conservative leadership into an articulation of 'national' values, this book is also a study of a Conservative public doctrine.

Nevertheless, because Baldwin's career has attracted so much controversy and misunderstanding, a necessary preliminary – the first chapter – is to re-examine its course and its chief episodes. Here as elsewhere specific misconceptions and factual errors have been addressed in the notes, in order to avoid cluttering the text. The second chapter begins the task of defining the qualities of Baldwin's leadership, chiefly by a process of elimination but with the effect of emphasising its peculiarities. Because he displayed such an unusual combination of political characteristics, chapters 3 and 4 investigate their sources – in what is intended as a model of how examination of an interwar politician's early life can genuinely and effectively illuminate his career. Chapter 5 describes Baldwin's public assessment of the situation he thought it was his task to address, in order to indicate his purposes and his practice. The next five chapters then analyse more fully the various aspects of his form of Conservative doctrine. These chapters proceed largely from Baldwin's own perspective and quote extensively from his speeches, because this enables his intentions, meanings, and 'tone' – the texture of its presentation – to be most clearly understood. It also allows the substance and range of Conservative arguments to be more fully explicated, reaching beyond familiar emphases on 'economics' and 'class' to the constitution, to family, local and patriotic loyalties, to empire, ethics, and religion. The conclusion considers why Baldwin came to occupy a pre-eminent national position, and assesses his contributions to the Conservative party's interwar success and to public life more generally.

The starting point is to place Baldwin in his contemporary contexts. If this procedure seems obvious, it must be said that these contexts are neither those of the 'Baldwin' constructed during the 1940s and early 1950s, nor those of the 'Baldwin' that has confounded late twentieth-century social-democratic, statist, and secularised sensibilities. The actual Baldwin of the 1920s and 1930s must be understood as a man formed by a particular Victorian and Edwardian culture – comprising not just narrowly 'political' experiences but also industrial, moral, religious, and literary influences – who responded in a distinctive manner to the shocks and challenges which that culture suffered during the Great War

and its aftermath. He must also be understood by grasping the full implications of a truism: that what has since 1940 become known and familiar was in the interwar period new and unknown; that mass democracy, the Labour party, and trade unions could seem to threaten property, private enterprise, and national cohesion; that a second war of mechanised slaughter was feared as Armageddon, yet believed to be avoidable.